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North Carolina Company to Market Reduced-Carcinogen Tobacco

For a smoker who enjoys cigarettes, the downside has always been the nicotine and carcinogens. Coming soon to a store near you, a cigarette that may offer neither.

Beginning this fall, Vector Tobacco of Durham, North Carolina, plans to market Omni, a reduced carcinogen cigarette. Vector spokesman, Paul Caminiti, says the company has developed a process to treat tobacco that significantly reduces nitrosamines and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), considered to be the major cause of cancer from cigarettes.

And early next year, Vector plans to introduce the first genetically modified (GM) tobacco that the company says produces no nicotine. Omni Nicotine Free will also have reduced carcinogens.

"We think there is a potentially a very big market for these," says Caminiti. "The nicotine free may not appeal to younger people, but it may appeal to the older smoker who wants to get on the road to quit smoking."

Focus group testing has shown that smokers liked the taste of the tobacco and found they were smoking fewer cigarettes. "They felt they were more in control of their smoking," says Caminiti.

The genetically modified tobacco plant was developed by Vector with the help of Dr. Mark Conkling, former North Carolina State molecular biologist and researcher, who now works for Vector.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Dr. Conkling identified the gene that produces nicotine in the tobacco plant's roots. He succeeded in shutting down the nicotine gene and blocking formation of the nicotine, the company says, without effecting the viability of the plant or the taste of the cigarette.

Genetically modified tobacco makes for strange bedfellows. In Pennsylvania, Amish farmers are growing it this summer. Farmers in Illinois, Mississippi, and Louisiana are also growing the new crop this summer.

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However, the premier tobacco growing state, North Carolina, has so far shunned genetically modified tobacco. "A lot of companies like Philip Morris are rejecting buying genetically modified tobacco, afraid if it gets into the chain with other tobacco, not genetically modified, it could ruin the tobacco industry, what's left of it now," says Charlie Zink of the Farm Service Agency office in Madison County, North Carolina.

A plant in Roxboro, North Carolina, is being refurbished to produce the "Omni Nicotine Free" brand. Vector chose separate production facilities to segregate the no-nic tobacco from the traditional variety.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has set guidelines for growing genetically modified tobacco that require a buffer zone of more than 1,000 feet between the genetically modified variety and traditional tobacco. Flowers must be removed from the GM tobacco to avoid cross-pollination in the field with non-GM tobacco.

Vector is finding it easier to grow tobacco than to develop a cure for tobacco addiction. The company intends to eventually submit to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for approval, the Omni Nicotine Free brand as what the company is calling a "market cessation device."

"A new cigarette doesn't need to go through the FDA, but a nicotine patch does," says Caminiti.

Vector is part of Vector Group, a publicly traded company that also owns the Liggett Group, which is the smallest of the five major tobacco companies. With two percent of the U.S. market, Liggett sells mostly discount cigarettes such as Pyramid, and Tourney. Eve is the only branded cigarette Liggett sells.

Does the move to a no-nicotine tobacco spell suicide for the company? The Vector spokesman says no, in fact, Vector president, Bennett LeBow is morally driven to do the right thing. "If tobacco companies are telling the truth about not marketing to kids, the industry will be out of business soon anyway," says Caminiti.

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

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